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An Explanation of The Noble Sūtra on the Four Factors

BY

Vasubandhu

**Āryacaturdharmaḥkāvyaḥ*

· Toh 3990 ·

Degé Tengyur, vol. 113 (mdo 'grel, ngi), folios 66.a–66.b



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under the patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha

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co.

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SUMMARY

- s.1 This short commentary, ascribed to Vasubandhu, explains *The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra on the Four Factors* (*Āryacaturdharmakanāmahāyānasūtra*, Toh 251), a discourse on a set of four factors of the path of a bodhisattva: the thought of awakening, the spiritual friend, the twin qualities of tolerance and lenience, and dwelling in the forest. The commentary proposes various reasons for the sūtra's composition and explains why it refers to bodhisattvas as followers of the Great Vehicle. It also specifies the four factors, which obstructive elements these factors overcome, which beneficial elements they support, and why śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas are not called bodhisattvas.

ac.

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ac.1 The translation was completed by Adam Pearcey, under the patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, and was edited by the 84000 editorial team.

i.

INTRODUCTION

i.1

An Explanation of The Noble Sūtra on the Four Factors (Toh 3990), attributed in the text itself to the famed Indian scholar Vasubandhu,¹ is a commentary on *The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra on the Four Factors* (*Āryacaturdharmaśāsanāmahāyānasūtra*, Toh 251).² In this short sūtra, the Buddha lists the thought of awakening, the spiritual friend, the twin qualities of tolerance and lenience, and dwelling in the forest, as four factors that bodhisattvas should not abandon even at the cost of their lives. Vasubandhu's commentary is one of two commentaries related to that sūtra preserved in Tibetan in the Tengyur. The other, *A Commentary on An Explanation of The Noble Sūtra on the Four Factors* (**Āryacaturdharmaśāsanāyānaṭīkā*; 'phags pa chos bzhi pa'i rgya cher bshad pa'i rgya cher 'grel pa, Toh 3990a), is attributed to Jñānadatta,³ and is a commentary on Vasubandhu's text rather than on the sūtra itself.⁴

i.2

Vasubandhu's commentary begins with a discussion of the sūtra's purpose. The author then proceeds to discuss why the sūtra focuses specifically on four factors. Several different reasons are given, including simplicity and ease of memorization. The commentary also notes that the sūtra refers to followers of the Great Vehicle as bodhisattvas, great beings, and it offers some interesting explanations for the use of these terms.

i.3

The longest portion of the commentary pairs the four factors from the sūtra with other sets of four factors, such as four factors conducive to the accumulation of the supplies for awakening. It describes the set of four factors from the sūtra either as providing the basis for these other factors, or as the antidote to them. Jñānadatta unpacks the specifics of these correlations at greater length in the subcommentary. The main commentary concludes with a brief comment on why those who strive for the awakening of śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas are not also called bodhisattvas and reiterates the main purpose of the sūtra. The commentary makes no mention of the sūtra's two concluding verses.⁵

- i.4 There is no translator's colophon to Vasubandhu's commentary and therefore no clear information as to who translated it. Jñānadatta's commentary does have a colophon, stating that the translators were Dānaśīla, Prajñāvarman, and Yeshé De. It is possible that both commentaries were translated at the same time and that the colophon applies to them both. The two commentaries are also listed together in the Denkarma catalog of translated works,⁶ and both texts also appear among the Dunhuang documents (IOL Tib J 71–74).
- i.5 The following translation was primarily based on the Degé block print with reference to the Comparative Edition (*dpe bsdur ma*) and the commentary ascribed to Jñānadatta.

An Explanation of The Noble Sūtra on the Four Factors

1.

The Translation

[F.66.a]

1.1 Homage to the youthful Mañjuśrī!

This sūtra explains that for as long as they live, bodhisattvas, great beings, should not abandon four factors even at the cost of their lives. For what purpose was it undertaken? It was undertaken for the purpose of giving an explanation to those who have embarked upon the Great Vehicle and might be confused regarding how unsurpassable awakening should be attained. It was also undertaken for the purpose of encouraging the heedless to take proper care, motivating those who are thoroughly discouraged, and delighting those who have set out on the Great Vehicle.

1.2 The number four is used so that anyone who is intimidated by vastness will abandon any resistance to listening to the teaching. Using a number also facilitates memorization. Tolerance and gentleness, which appear toward the end, are not counted separately because they both have a single purpose.⁷

1.3 There are many ways of referring to those who have set out on the Great Vehicle, but here two names are specified.⁸ There are three reasons for this, related to interest, practice, and comprehension. Because of their interest in profound objects of knowledge, they are referred to as *bodhisattvas*, and because of their interest in great power, they are referred to as *great beings*. How do these names relate to practice? Such beings strive intensely toward complete, perfect, and unsurpassable awakening for themselves, and they fully protect all sentient beings from suffering. How do these names relate to understanding? Awakening is realized through the two powers. What are these two? They are the power of intelligence and the power of diligence. Awakening cannot be realized where there is a lack of knowledge or through minimal effort.

- 1.4 The statement that these factors should not be relinquished for as long [F.66.b] as one lives is an indication that they should be continuously present. “Even at the cost of their lives” shows just how highly these factors are to be regarded.
- 1.5 What is the reason that there are said to be four factors? Is this not too few or too many? There are four factors that obstruct the accumulation of the supplies necessary for awakening, and these are four remedies for them. What are these four obstructive factors? They are (1) not seeking the goal, (2) not knowing the methods, (3) a lack of concern for sentient beings, and (4) concern for sense objects. The alternative set of four is (1) not getting started, (2) getting started in the wrong way, (3) quitting what one has started, and (4) becoming distracted after getting started.
- 1.6 Alternatively, there are four factors conducive to the accumulation of the supplies necessary for awakening, and these four factors constitute their foundation. What are the four factors conducive to the accumulation of the supplies necessary for awakening? They are (1) longing for instructions and guidance, (2) acquiring them, (3) being a worthy recipient of them, and (4) having accomplished them. The alternative set of four is (1) seeking the goal, (2) knowing the methods and then accomplishing them, with subdivision into (3) bringing sentient beings to maturity, and (4) developing the qualities of a buddha.
- 1.7 Another set of four is (1) not abandoning saṃsāra, (2) remaining wholly undefiled by it, (3) attracting sentient beings, and (4) becoming purified through diligence.
- 1.8 Alternatively, four reasons one would travel a difficult path to traverse are (1) the wish to go, (2) knowledge of the path, (3) setting aside discouragement, and (4) heedfulness. It is through these that the path of saṃsara is traversed, and the four factors constitute their foundation.
- 1.9 Why are those who strive for the awakening of the śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas not called bodhisattvas? It is because the name applies only to the preeminent case, just as in the case of “the light-maker.”⁹
- 1.10 Put briefly, in this sūtra the Blessed One explains the actions that are appropriate for those who have embarked upon the Great Vehicle and how these actions will not fail to bear fruit.
- 1.11 *This concludes “An Explanation of The Noble Sūtra of the Four Factors” by the Master Vasubandhu.*

n.

NOTES

- n.1 Vasubandhu is thought to have flourished in the fourth or fifth century CE, but many of the details of his life are unclear. For attempts to reconcile the various biographical sources, see Anacker (1984), pp. 7–28, Pereira and Tiso (1987), Skilling (2000), and Gold (2015) pp. 1–21.
- n.2 Pearcey, Adam. trans., *The Sūtra on the Four Factors* (<http://read.84000.co/translation/toh251.html>), Toh 251 (84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, 2023).
- n.3 That commentary, titled *'phags pa chos bzhi pa'i rnam par bshad pa'i rgya cher 'grel pa*, is the only text attributed to Jñānadatta (ye shes byin) within the Tengyur. However, another text by an author of that name can be found among the Dunhuang documents: *'phags pa sgo drug pa'i gzungs kyi rnam par bshad pa rgya cher 'grel pa* (IOL Tib J 430 (http://idp.bl.uk/database/oo_loader.a4d?pm=IOL Tib J 430;img=1)).
- n.4 Jñānadatta begins his commentary by noting that the sūtra has already been commented on by “scholars” (*mkhas pa dag*)—the plural particle here might even indicate the Sanskrit dual and thus signify two scholars. In any case, Jñānadatta’s words suggest the existence of at least one other commentary on the sūtra that is no longer extant.
- n.5 Jñānadatta does cite two lines from these verses in his sub-commentary:
mkhas 'dir chos 'di dag la rtag gnas na | bdud rnams bcom ste byang chub 'tshang rgya'o | |.
- n.6 See Denkarma F.306.b.1. See also Herrmann-Pfandt (2008), pp. 315–17. Vasubandhu’s text is no. 557.
- n.7 In his commentary, Jñānadatta elaborates further on this point and says that the two serve as an antidote to wishing harm on others.

- n.8 In commenting on this, Jñānadatta cites a passage from the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* that offers a number of different epithets: “Bodhisattva, great being, intelligent one, supreme in brilliance, heir of the victors, conqueror, supporter of victory, scion of the victorious, mighty one, marvelous one, leader, one of great renown, compassionate one, possessor of great merit, lord, and similarly, the righteous one.” (*byang chub sems dpa’ sems dpa’ che | blo dang ldan pa gsal ba’i mchog | rgyal sras rgyal ba nyid dang ni | rgyal gzhi rgyal ba’i myu gu dang | rtsal dang ldan pa ngo mtshar ba | ded dpon grags pa chen po dang | thugs rje ldan dang bsod nams che | dbang phyug de bzhin chos can no |*). See Engle (2016), pp. 490–91.
- n.9 “Light-maker” (*snang byed* in Tibetan, or *bhāskara* in Sanskrit) is a common name for the sun. Jñānadatta gives the counterexample of a firefly (*srin bu me khyer*) as a lesser source of illumination.

b.

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GLOSSARY

· Types of attestation for names and terms of the corresponding ·
source language

AS	<i>Attested in source text</i> This term is attested in a manuscript used as a source for this translation.
AO	<i>Attested in other text</i> This term is attested in other manuscripts with a parallel or similar context.
AD	<i>Attested in dictionary</i> This term is attested in dictionaries matching Tibetan to the corresponding language.
AA	<i>Approximate attestation</i> The attestation of this name is approximate. It is based on other names where the relationship between the Tibetan and source language is attested in dictionaries or other manuscripts.
RP	<i>Reconstruction from Tibetan phonetic rendering</i> This term is a reconstruction based on the Tibetan phonetic rendering of the term.
RS	<i>Reconstruction from Tibetan semantic rendering</i> This term is a reconstruction based on the semantics of the Tibetan translation.
SU	<i>Source unspecified</i> This term has been supplied from an unspecified source, which most often is a widely trusted dictionary.

g.1 dwelling in the forest

dgon pa la gnas pa

དགོན་པ་ལ་གནས་པ།

araṇyavāsa^{AO}

An ideal lifestyle for a practitioner is described as dwelling in a place suitably removed from the social world of the town so as to best enable spiritual practice. In some contexts the term can also be understood on a more inward level as remaining free from distraction and other disturbing states of mind.

g.2 lenience

des pa

དེས་པ།

sauratya

Gentleness, especially in one's thoughts and behavior toward others; the absence of any desire for retaliation. This is often paired with tolerance.

g.3 spiritual friend

dge ba'i bshes gnyen

དགེ་བའི་བཤེས་གཉེན།

kalyāṇamitra

A teacher of the spiritual path.

g.4 thought of awakening

byang chub sems

བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས།

bodhicitta

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

In the general Mahāyāna teachings, bodhicitta, the mind of awakening, is the intention or the strong aspiration to attain awakening for the sake of all sentient beings. Its two aspects on the relative level of truth are famously summarized in Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (chapter 1, verses 15, 16):

"Bodhicitta, the awakened mind, is known in brief to have two aspects: First, aspiring, bodhicitta in intention; Then active bodhicitta, practical engagement. These correspond to the wish to go and then actually setting out." On the level of absolute truth, bodhicitta is the realization of emptiness or the awakened mind itself.

g.5 tolerance

bzod pa

བཟོད་པ།

kṣānti

Forbearance of the harm done to one by others.

g.6 Vasubandhu

dbyig gnyen

བཅིག་གཉེན།

vasubandhu

The great scholar and author of fourth or fifth century Buddhist India, born in Gandhāra and said according to Tibetan and Chinese traditions to have been related to Asaṅga, perhaps as his younger brother.